

Public art project to explore the nature of trust

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Malcolm Gay - Arts Reporterr



Is your word really your bond?

The question lies at the heart of “Public Trust,” an interactive public art project that over the next three weeks will set up shop at various locations around Greater Boston.

Conceived by Brooklyn-based artist Paul Ramírez Jonas, the collaborative project asks participants not merely to consider the meaning of their words, but also to ponder the use (and, let’s face it, during this singular election cycle, abuse) of that most essential social currency: the promise.

“Each of us individually thinks we still have our word, but collectively we have a great amount of mistrust that people will come through with a promise,” said Ramírez Jonas. “It still seems to work at the individual basis, but collectively we’re all aware that we’re in a little bit of trouble.”

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The Globe's top picks for what to see and do each weekend, in Boston and beyond. Culling promises from the day’s news — from politicians, drug makers, weather forecasters, pundits, dieticians, etc. — Ramírez Jonas plans to display these public vows on a 16-by-16-foot billboard. Bystanders will then be invited to make promises of their own, which the artist and his team of “artist-ambassadors” will spell out in the center of the billboard for all to see.

“There’s no predicted outcome, it’s simply opening up a conversation,” said Kate Gilbert, director of Now and There, the arts nonprofit that commissioned the work. “The project allows us to look at the promise I make to myself. How am I going to keep that versus the promise an elected official is making to me, or the promise of a country or a company?”

To facilitate the experience, Ramírez Jonas will ask participants to make rubbings of their promise — graphite-on-paper artworks that are signed by the participant. Each rubbing will come in an edition of two — one to be kept by the participant, the other by “Public Trust,” which plans eventually to compile them into a book.

□
Artist Paul Ramírez Jonas

“When you make work that you want people to be engaged in, it has to be an exchange,” said Ramírez Jonas. “My hope is that this peripheral thing is also happening: People are interacting, they’re making their promise, and then they go home and they have a drawing.”

Funded by the Lewis Family Foundation, “Public Trust” will also provide a host of traditional objects to swear by: the Bible, the Koran, a handshake, even a pinky-swear.

“It’s not meant to hold people accountable,” said Gilbert, whose organization helped bring the French artist JR’s “Inside Out” mural project to Boston last fall. “I really don’t care if they follow up on this particular promise, but I would like to know a year from now if this project had any impact on them.”

Existing mainly outside the traditional gallery system, Ramírez Jonas’s art relies less on the creation of distinct art objects than it does on the experience of those who help bring it into existence. Known as social practice or participatory art, the work is often ephemeral in nature — specific to its time, place, and the community that participates.

“I really just focus on the experience: How can I make it meaningful to the person who comes to the work?,” said Ramírez Jonas. “It’s not about being in the galleries or art history. I just focus on one viewer at a time.”

Nevertheless, Ramírez Jonas often embeds a physical object into the art experience. In an earlier commission for Cambridge, the artist sent keys to 5,000 people who lived around Taylor Square, in West Cambridge. The keys, which opened a gate to a diminutive public park, said “copy me” on one side and were accompanied by a letter encouraging recipients to give away copies of the key.

“That was a very important project for me,” said Ramírez Jonas, who went on to do a similar project in New York, giving away keys that could be used at multiple sites around the city. “I can’t show this in a museum or a gallery, nor can it really be replicated. It was very specific to that little piece of land in Cambridge.”

In “Public Trust,” which opens Saturday in Dudley Square before decamping for one-week stands in Kendall and Copley squares, Ramírez Jonas wanted to explore the power of language.

“There’s a kind of magic to our words,” he said. “It’s the capacity to make promises that holds the entire society together.”

To illustrate the point, he described a wedding he'd recently attended.

“There’s a point where someone says, with words, ‘Now you’re married,’ and then the in-laws say, ‘Now you’re my son,’” Ramírez Jonas recalled. “I was like, ‘Whoa! They just made that happen — with words.’ ”

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